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Strategic Mapping of the MGNREGS Social Audit Landscape: A Bibliometric Exploration through Concepts and Themes

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Abstract

An increasing volume of scholarly work has examined the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), with a particular emphasis on its social audit processes that strengthen accountability and participatory governance in rural India. This study presents a comprehensive review and mapping of the existing literature using bibliometric techniques, analysing 235 documents indexed in Scopus between 2005 and 2025. Employing VOSviewer and Biblioshiny, the analysis highlights both well-explored and underrepresented areas of research, while also identifying emerging and untapped themes that form the basis for further inquiry. The results reveal that rural development, employment generation, and governance remain central concerns in the discourse, whereas recent studies increasingly focus on digital tools, e-governance, and resilience in the face of climate change. Over time, the scholarly attention appears to have shifted from legal and procedural dimensions toward issues of digital inclusion, sustainability, and the integration of technology in audit practices. By synthesizing these trends, this work not only addresses a critical gap in the literature but also underscores new directions for enhancing the design and implementation of MGNREGS. The findings hold relevance for academics and provide actionable insights for policymakers seeking to strengthen accountability mechanisms, promote inclusivity, and adapt the scheme to contemporary development challenges.

Keywords: Accountability, Bibliometric Analysis, E-Governance, MGNREGS, Social Audit, Transparency.

Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) represents one of the most ambitious rights-based employment initiatives globally, underscoring India's strong commitment to inclusive rural development and participatory governance (1). The plan has been offering 100 days of manual labour annually to rural households since 2006, where the household has a desire to engage in the plan. Its decentralised governance framework entrusts local authorities with the responsibility of planning, implementing, and monitoring employment activities, thus promoting grassroots participation and administrative efficiency (2, 3). One of the most distinctive components of the MGNREGS is its institutionalised practice of social audits, a community-driven mechanism that enhances transparency and empowers citizens to scrutinise the implementation process (4, 5). These audits foster a culture of accountability, bridging the gap between state and rural beneficiaries (6). Since the scheme is set to benefit society, involves people, and requires a large investment, it has drawn the attention of researchers in different fields. Scholars have rigorously analysed various dimensions of the MGNREGS, ranging from its economic implications for rural livelihoods to its influence on gender empowerment, social equity, and ecological outcomes (7-9). Although much research has been conducted on the programme, it has failed to acquire a large-scale sweep of the programme in terms of its progression and change in thought, primarily with regard to the entire social audit process. Although social audits are pivotal to MGNREGS' integrity of the MGNREGS and public trust in it, they have not been thoroughly mapped within the academic discourse in terms of their conceptual foundations, practical challenges, and evolving thematic relevance (10, 11). To overcome this shortcoming, this study undertakes a strategic analysis and mapping of the literature on social audits as applied to the MGNREGS. The analysis of 235 published items in Scopus catalogues suggests all the key thematic themes, outlines the development of the field, and delimits new emerging areas for future research.

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The use of strategic mapping tools facilitates a granular understanding of how knowledge in this area has evolved over time, which theoretical perspectives have dominated the discourse, and where future enquiries might be most impactful (12, 13). The study is informative for educators, governmental leaders, professionals in the field of rural affairs, digital openness programs, and the need to reform the workings of institutions dominated by the government. Ultimately, by charting the trajectory of MGNREGS social audit research, this study contributes to advancing a more nuanced and actionable knowledge base that can support evidence-driven policy and participatory development in India (14, 15).

Theoretical Background

Research on the MGNREGS has been established in different foundations in different disciplines that exhibit how the scheme is impacted by the laws and the social life, the economy, and the environment. As a landmark initiative in India's rural development framework, the MGNREGS has catalysed scholarly interest not only for its rights-based approach to employment but also for its innovative governance structures, participatory mechanisms, and wide-ranging socioeconomic impacts (2, 16). Five broad themes are discussed to tell the story of how the scheme has evolved: the growth of MGNREGS research, the significance of social audit in participatory governance, the application of technology, how to make the scheme climate-resilient, and gender and equity promotion. All these themes together provide a clear insight into the different intellectual contributions to the MGNREGS and demonstrate the critical areas that analysis can be used to improve policies and actions in the future.

History of the MGNREGS

Research on the MGNREGS has concentrated on poverty reduction, employment assurance, and decentralised governance. The scheme emerged as a policy innovation that institutionalised employment as a legal right, distinguishing itself from earlier welfare programs by its scale, scope, and legal framework (1, 17). Early academic studies (2005–2012) focused on assessing legislative intent, implementation challenges, and poverty reduction outcomes. Researchers have emphasised the program's transformative potential in rural empowerment, while others have highlighted operational issues such as delayed wage payments, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies (18-21). Later analyses began to consider interstate variations and policy design mechanisms (22).

Social Audits

The Pillar of Participatory Governance the MGNREGS has mandated social audits which are a novel means to ensure that the actions performed by the government village are transparent and genuine. Rooted in participatory democracy and community oversight theories, social audits facilitate grassroots monitoring by enabling stakeholders to scrutinise records, inspect worksites and voice grievances (4, 18). Empirical studies have underscored their role in uncovering leakages, reducing corruption, and promoting civic engagement (23, 24). However, the effectiveness of social audits is contingent on institutional support, political will, and community capacity, making it a fertile area for further enquiry (10, 25).

Digitalisation and Integration of Technology

The question of how governance and technology influence accountability processes in rural regions has gained popularity in recent years. The integration of digital tools, geo-tagging, biometric attendance, and e-governance platforms has begun to reshape the landscape of social audits (26, 27). Although digitalisation would enable greater transparency, questions arise about the owner of the data, the people taught to work with the new technology, and those discriminated against. The literature reflects a nascent but expanding focus on how Information and Communication Tools (ICT) can augment or hinder participatory accountability (28).

Climate Change and Rural Resilience

A new topic that is developing is ensuring that MGNREGS forms part of the climate change and environmental activities. Scholars have examined how the scheme contributes to climate-adaptive infrastructure, such as water conservation and afforestation, positioning it as a critical node in India's climate action strategy (8,26). The synergy between employment generation and ecological restoration represents a novel conceptual linkage that warrants a deeper theoretical exploration (24).

Gender and Equity

MGNREGS has been lauded for enhancing female labour force participation, offering financial autonomy, and providing social recognition to women in rural India (9, 29). A social audit can lead to some form of women's role in governance that can lead to inclusive development. Nonetheless, studies have revealed persistent barriers, including patriarchal norms, safety concerns, and limited representation in decision-making, which merit sustained analytical focus (7, 30).

The above sections show that the MGNREGS is an ever-evolving policy initiative implicating welfare, governance, technology, the environment, and social justice. Beginning as an idea geared to assist poorer classes; the scheme is currently being seen as a tool of environmental change and women's empowerment. Social audits contribute significantly to accountability and participation in society, but their effect is still dependent on the overall impact of society. Rural development is more universal and open because of the increasing number of digital solutions and a rise in the focus on climate adaptation and equal opportunity. The theories discussed herein can be used as the foundations of the bibliometric analysis being conducted in this paper and provide a direction on how to approach the development of social audits within MGNREGS.

Although there is an expanding body of research on the MGNREGS, a comprehensive and strategic analysis of its intellectual development, especially concerning social audits, is notably lacking (10, 11). Existing studies have predominantly focused on the scheme's implementation outcomes, interstate variations, and sectoral impacts on poverty alleviation, gender equity, and environmental sustainability (7-9). Although social audits are recognised as a fundamental aspect of participatory governance, there is a notable gap in the comprehensive understanding of the evolution of academic discussions on this topic, both in terms of concepts and themes (6, 18). Furthermore, while some studies have briefly explored the integration of digital technologies and how the scheme intersects with climate resilience and gender empowerment, these discussions are often fragmented and specific to individual cases, offering limited insights into broader academic trends (26, 31). No previous studies have utilised strategic bibliometric mapping to identify the motor, basic, niche, and emerging/declining themes that characterise the knowledge base of MGNREGS social audit research (12, 13). Moreover, the existing literature does not adequately track how the thematic and conceptual focus of this research area has changed over different time periods, especially in response to policy changes and technological progress (14). This research aims to unify different ideas in the context of MGNREGS social audits by reviewing 235 articles found in Scopus. The study's objectives include mapping key intellectual clusters, emphasising significant research paths, and pinpointing areas that have not been thoroughly explored and deserve academic focus (15, 16). This paper provides an explanation of how the MGNREGS social audit evolved and may guide future research on participatory governance, current accountable technology, and sustainable development.

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, a systematic bibliometric approach to research design and methodology was conducted to unearth the intellectual and topical geography of research findings on social audit of the MGNREGS. To carefully analyse the 235 research articles through the Scopus database from 2005 to 2025, we first entered key terms of social audits, participatory governance, and MGNREGS and then visualised and comprehended the obtained bibliometric data with two applications, viz. VOS viewer and Biblioshiny are both R-based applications. Notable steps are those towards mapping the construction of maps to provide the basic, motor, niche, and emerging topics, the tracking of conceptual shifts via thematic evolution mapping, and the connexions between different topics, authors, and keywords with factorial analysis. The powerful stance enables one to have a better picture of the past, key players, and future development of the discipline.

Data sources and Search strategy

A bibliometric dataset was constructed by querying the Scopus database, which is recognised for its comprehensive indexing of peer-reviewed social science literature (32). For this study, the researcher used Boolean operators to target important terms such as "MGNREGS", "Social Audit", "Rural Employment", and "Governance", and selected only articles published from 2005 to 2025. Only English-language journal articles, reviews, and scholarly book chapters were retained to ensure quality and relevance (13).

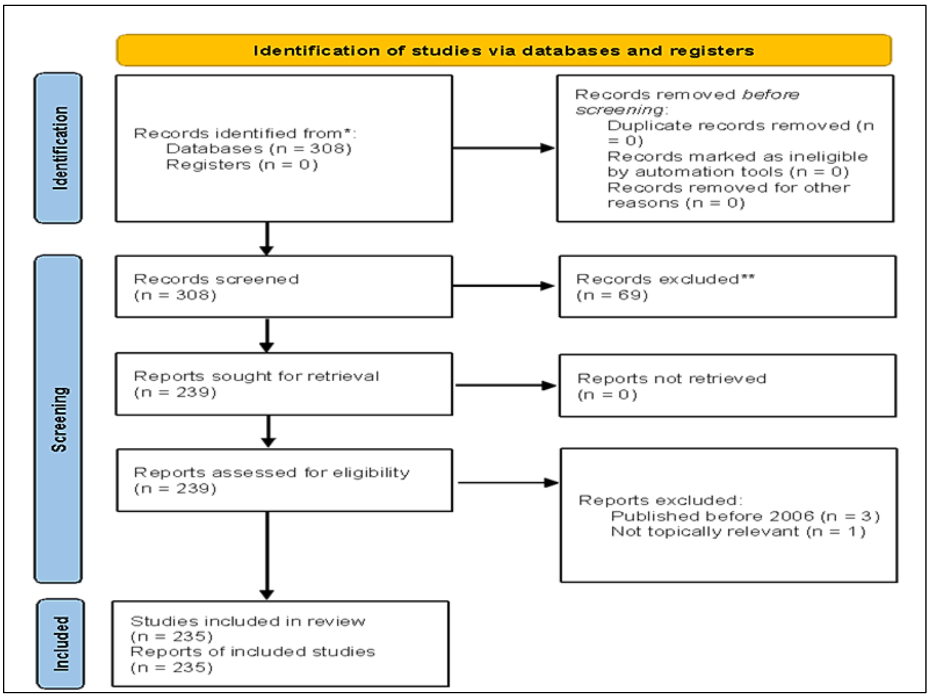

Figure 1: PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) Flow Chart

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow chart outlining the article selection process. The initial search retrieved 308 records, which were systematically screened. After removing duplicates, non–peer-reviewed works, and pre-period publications, 235 documents were retained for the analysis, ensuring methodological rigor and replicability (33).

Tools and Methods of Analytical techniques

The analysis was performed using VOS viewer and Biblioshiny. VOS viewer was used to create networks which had associated keywords that were found together and were labelled with author-provided and index keywords. Biblioshiny, a web interface of the Bibliometric R-package, enabled thematic mapping and longitudinal analysis (12, 15).

Thematic Evolution and Strategic Mapping

A strategic thematic map was developed by plotting clusters on a two-dimensional plane defined by centrality (degree of interaction with other themes) and density (internal coherence). Themes were categorised into four quadrants: motor (high centrality and density), basic (high centrality and low density), niche (low centrality and high density), and emerging/declining (low centrality and density) themes. Thematic evolution was tracked over five time slices (2005–2012, 2013–2015, 2016–2019, 2020–2022, and 2023–2025) using Sankey diagrams to visualise the transformation of research priorities (14).

Sensitivity and Validation Analysis

Stability in the findings was established by manipulating the clustering settings and time periods. Thematic outputs were cross-validated with seminal qualitative literature, ensuring that quantitative patterns aligned with established scholarly narratives (3,16). It provides a comprehensive outline of conducting research on the MGNREGS social audit, and, therefore, it becomes easy to determine the history, major actors, and potential prospects of the project.

Results

Objective 1: To identify and classify the motor, basic, niche, and emerging/declining themes that constitute the knowledge base of MGNREGS research.

This objective was addressed using the centricity and density measures of multifold correspondence analyses to carry out strategic mapping in this study. This two-dimensional mapping framework classifies themes into four strategic quadrants motor, basic, niche, and emerging or declining based on their relevance and maturity within the research field (12, 13). Motor themes- strong and highly linked; basic regions are matters of importance but quite early stages; niche areas are well formed and on their own; and emerging/ declining areas are relatively less important or are at initial stages. This typology would enable us to observe the sphere of interests and the impact these ideas have in different academic spheres. This map analyses research themes by comparing them based on centrality and density. A centrality calculation indicates the relationship of a theme to others, hence the relevance and extent of the theme in the whole research field. Density measures the internal cohesion and developmental maturity of a theme, reflecting how well established and conceptually integrated it is (14, 32).

All themes in the framework were organised into four categories.

Motor Themes (High Centrality, High Density): These themes are both well-developed and highly influential, serving as the intellectual backbone of the research domain. Due to the closely interconnected internal elements and broad connexions to the external environment, they become one of the primary forces directing the primary areas of knowledge in their domain.

Basic Themes (High Centrality, Low Density): Themes in this quadrant are critical and broadly connected across the domain but remain internally underdeveloped. These are all vital concepts and should be explored and advocated through theoretical formulations to become solid concepts in the future.

Niche Themes (Low Centrality, High Density): Niche themes are characterised by high specialisation and methodological rigor but exhibit limited connectivity to the wider research network. Such crystallised, though separate, subjects tend to form the principal subjects of federated areas, which are also limited.

Emerging or Declining Themes (Low Centrality, Low Density): Themes occupying this quadrant show minimal development and limited interaction, signalling either nascent areas with potential for growth or declining topics that have lost prominence within the research field.

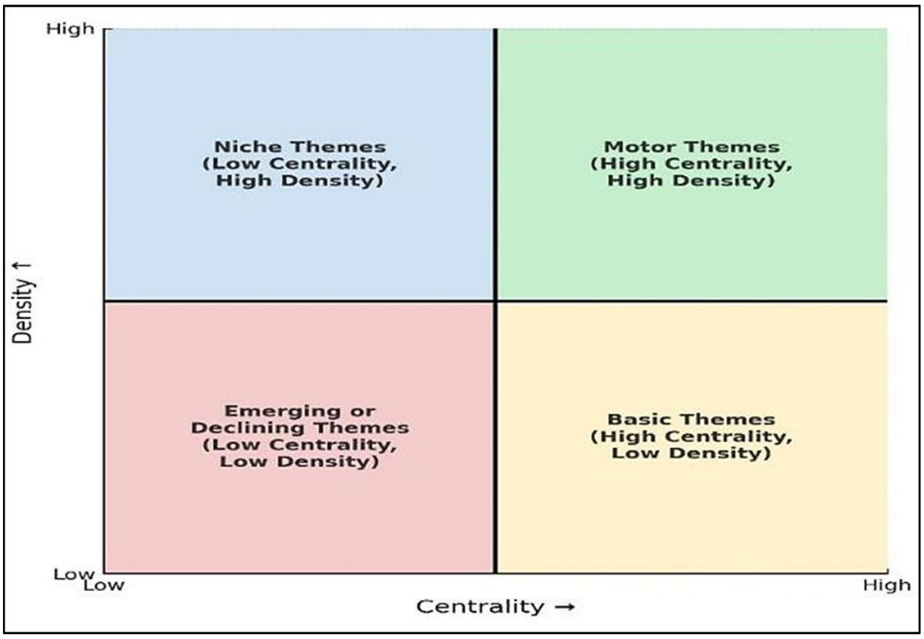

Figure 2: Thematic Map Quadrants

The literature on social audits pertaining to MGNREGS is opened up in themes following a systematic procedure with centrality and density measures pointing to the major topics and their forming which is shown in figure 2 and 3. The more central it is the more important and applicable it is in the research community, and the density demonstrates the closeness of the ideas it describes.

A combination of strong centrality and density is associated with India, rural development, rural employment, local government, labour supply, and decentralisation. They constitute the core content of teaching and therefore confirm the work of the program which is dedicated to developing rural jobs and the sustainability of rural democracy.

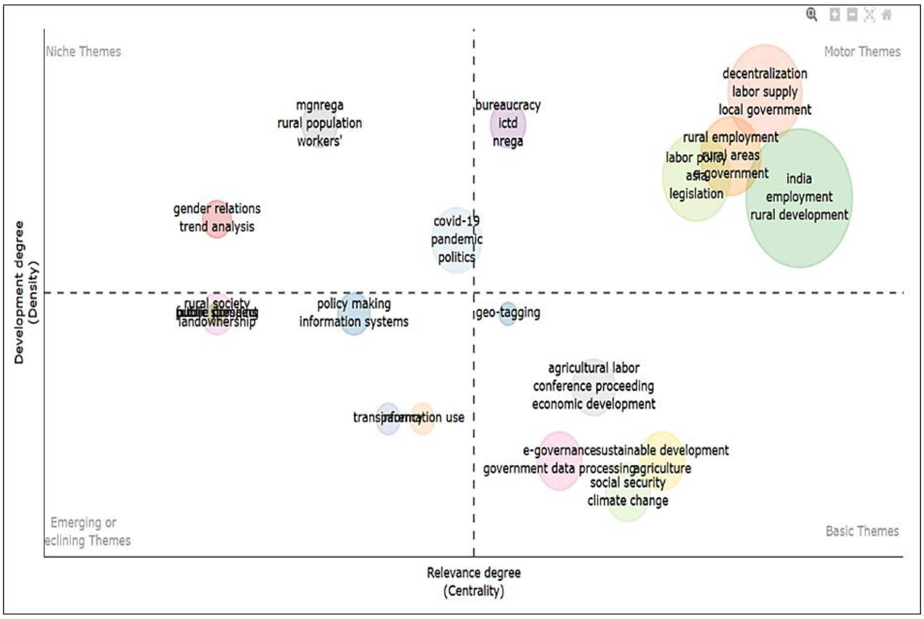

Figure 3: Strategic Thematic Mapping

These Niche Themes, being, MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) and, “rural population workers” are exhausted; however, they do not form the main topic of discussion. They concern certain spheres, focusing on regulatory principles and the population of the subject. Despite the fact that these approaches are well-designed, there is a lack of robust integration that demonstrates the possibility of improved collaborations. Key objects such as e-governance, social security, climate change, agricultural labour, and economic development are core actors but are not well understood. They show how digital governance has gained more academic interest, the connection between the existence of MGNREGS and welfare, and a sustainable environment under the MGNREGS scheme. Nevertheless, the nodes that have less significance in the network are the COVID-19 pandemic, gender relations, geo-tagging, bureaucracy, Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD), and policy making which are emerging or declining topics. For example, the pandemic demonstrated the ability of MGNREGS to respond to the crisis, yet there has been no significant research on such since then. This body of themes captures mature studies that focus primarily on governance and employment and identifies new opportunities in digitalisation, climate adaptation, and inclusive development. This proves that studies of MGNREGS social audits still cover major issues and follow recent changes. This section presents the core findings of the bibliometric and thematic analyses, organised in alignment with the four research objectives.

Objective 2: To map the dominant intellectual themes and influential clusters within MGNREGS social audit scholarship during 2005–2025.

To address this objective, we created an interconnection of keyword matches with VOS viewer. This bibliometric technique facilitated the identification of frequently occurring keywords and their associative patterns, enabling the recognition of intellectual clusters that structure the field (12, 13). By analysing the strength and frequency of co-occurrence relationships, this study highlights key thematic concentrations such as rural employment, decentralisation, governance, and transparency central pillars of the MGNREGS framework, as reflected in earlier studies on participatory governance and accountability (3, 14, 15). They point out the fundamental structure of MGNREGS social audit research and show the primary academic subjects on this topic.

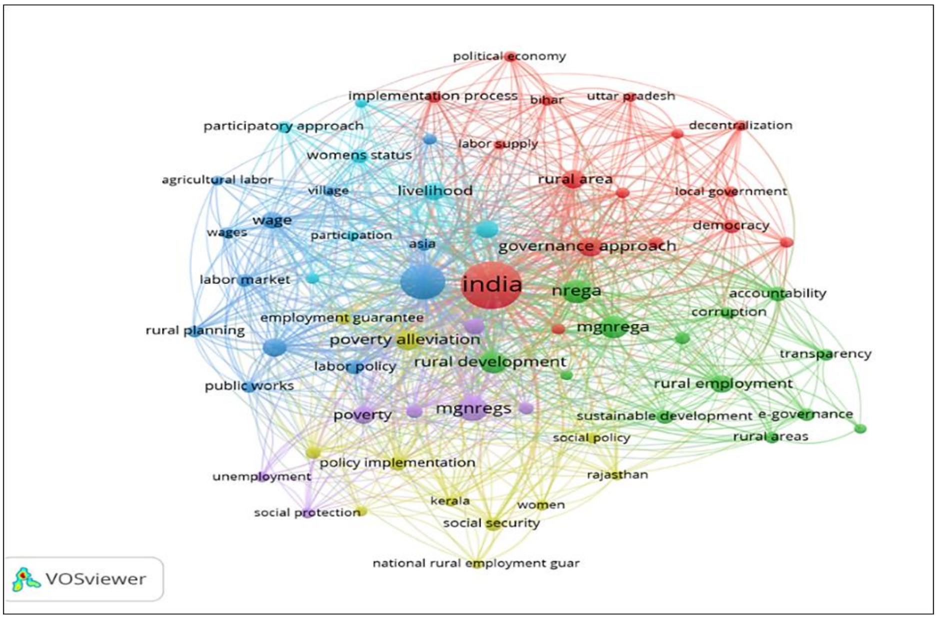

Figure 4: Network Visualisation

Figure 4 shows the VOS viewer network visualization of keywords from the selected literature. Rural living and employment are central to the network which clearly shows the role of the MGNREGA in these areas. Many social audits deal with governance, and using language such as "accountability”, "transparency”, and "local government" reflects their role in enabling people to govern themselves. The implication here is that it should be geared towards the eventual adoption of technology in auditing to accomplish improved outcomes in the future. Because of "poverty”, "unemployment”, and "social security”, the MGNREGS is viewed as support for society. There are keywords indicating region, gender, and social topics, as well as labour words that focus on the changes in rural work. The network depicts the area of governance and welfare along with the subject of digital innovation and inclusive development, which illustrates how the MGNREGS has shifted from an employment project to a great mechanism of social transformation.

Objective 3: To trace the evolution of conceptual structures and thematic orientations of the literature across distinct temporal phases.

This topic was analysed by dividing the research corpus into five separate time periods. By examining the emergence, persistence, and transformation of themes over time, this study traces how scholarly attention has shifted in response to evolving policy priorities, technological advancements, and societal needs (8, 23). Thematic flows across time slices reveal a transition from foundational concerns such as poverty and legislative frameworks to more contemporary issues including gender empowerment, crisis response, and digital inclusion (7, 9, 31). This approach elucidates the temporal dynamics of conceptual development within the field and enables researchers to understand how the field has matured across critical junctures in India's rural development discourse (13, 14).

Figure 5 illustrates the longitudinal thematic evolution of MGNREGS research (2005–2025). The Sankey diagram shows a shift from early policy- and poverty-focused studies toward themes of gender, empowerment, and social protection, particularly during COVID-19, before returning to employment-centered debates in recent years. The researcher demonstrates how the attention of scholars to MGNREGS social accountability changed in five periods 2005-2012, 2013-2015, 2016-2019, 2020-2022, 2023-2025. During 2005–2012, academic papers mostly concerned themselves with “National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)”, "India”, “employment”, and “poverty” to show the details of legislative policy and rural employment in India.

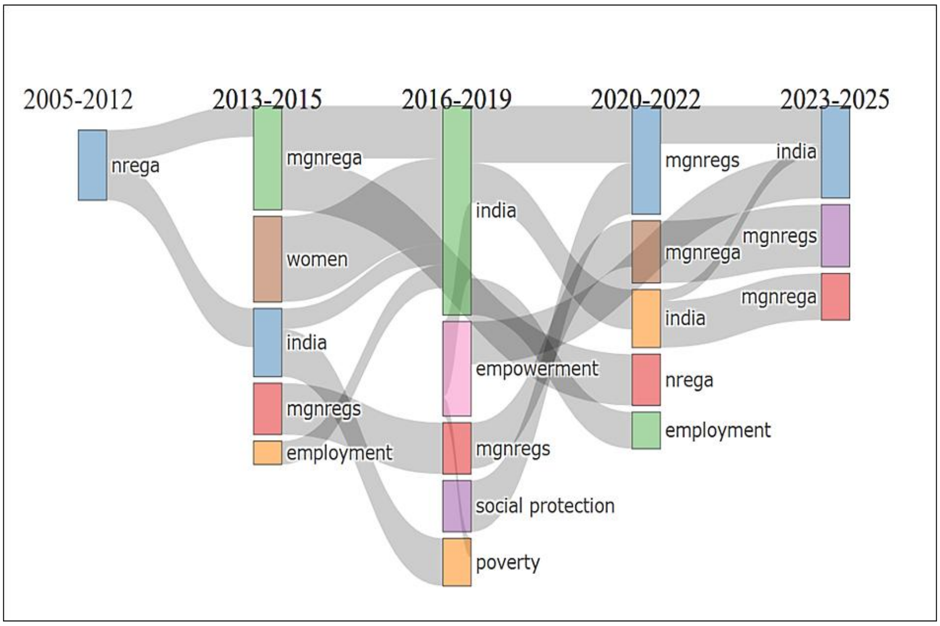

Figure 5: Longitudinal Thematic Evolution (2005-2025)

2013-2015 showed an increase in interest in gender equality and inclusion since it was also concerned with women in addition to MGNREGA and India, which were the primary topics covered in the previous years. Since the years 2016-2019, the arguments presented regarding the MGNREGS started to discuss rural community empowerment and rural security. Since the onset of COVID-19 (in 2020), the scheme has been related to employment and social protection, making the MGNREGS a social safety net during times of crisis. The themes between 2023 and 2025 were again about India, MGNREGS/MGNREGA and employment and so it was a sign of a recalibration to the original focus of the scheme as the scheme's objectives were not being met and that is why they have recalibrated it. According to the diagram, the MGNREGS shifts between policy issues and socio-economic issues and then to employment research as it acts to what the nation and the world encounter. Following this trend, one can outline the achievements of the concepts and intentions of MGNREGS social accountability research.

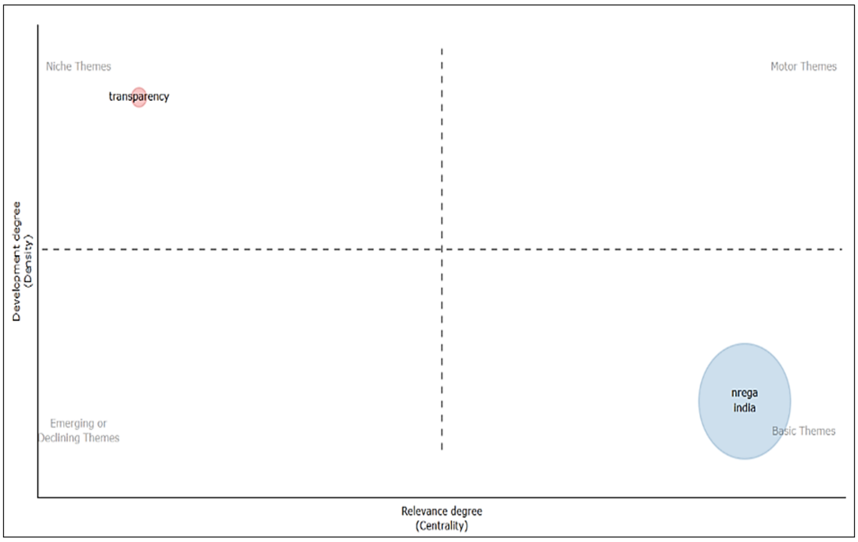

Figure 6: Thematic Evolution Time Slice (2005-2012)

Figure 6 presents the thematic evolution map for 2005–2012, highlighting the early stage of MGNREGS social audit research. Core themes such as NREGA and India dominated the field, while transparency appeared as a niche theme, signalling the initial emergence of accountability-focused scholarship. The concept of "Transparency" is found in the Niche Themes space, as it has a high density but low centrality. This implies that social auditing accountability is a very concerned area of study and not the primary concern of the broader domain of research. Transparency was first researched well, and this is an area that was highly considered in scholarly works but not a field utilised at large. In the Basic Themes, NREGA and India show high significance and few relationships. They represent the kernel of the new field, established upon legislative and background foundations, but the limited occurrence of the same demonstrate that this was a very primitive period of development. In the Motor and Emerging/Declining Themes quadrants, themes are not involved because research in these sectors has not advanced much yet. Few highly organised research clusters exist because there are not many themes based on the motor, and the topic content is not developing rapidly because there are only a small number of developing themes. This map presents a newly emerging research domain that is concerned with aiding the MGNREGS to discover its identity and establish means of accountability. Researching NREGA, India, and transparency paved the way for research works that involve the use of multiple fields.

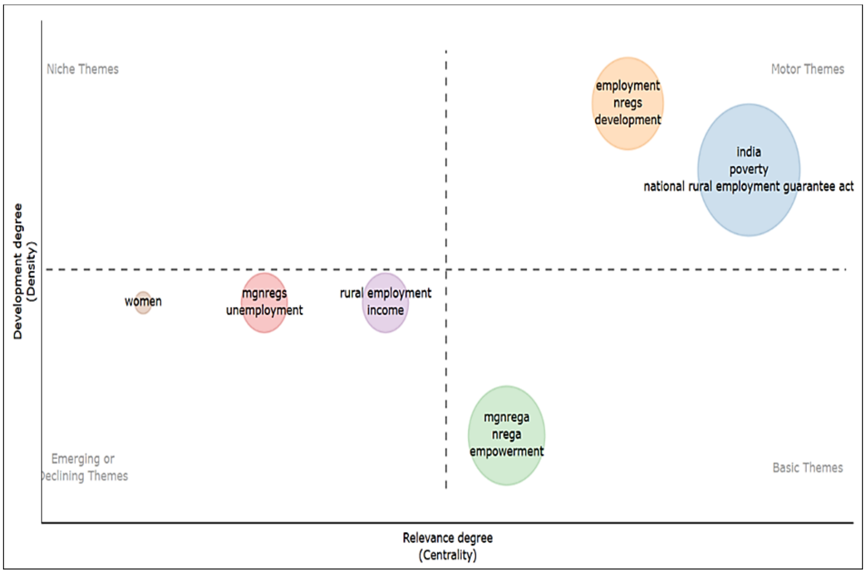

Figure 7: Thematic Evolution Time Slice (2013-2015)

During 2013–2015, MGNREGS social audit research showed growing dispersion, with India, poverty, and the National Rural Employment Program emerging as motor themes that shaped scholarly attention. Niche themes such as job creation remained underrepresented, while gender-related issues like women's employment and rural unemployment were still at an early stage of exploration. These trends, as depicted in Figure 7, reflect the gradual broadening of the field toward interdisciplinary concerns in governance, labour, and social outcomes. There is some significance indicated by the low density of MGNREGA and MGNREGS, which holds their most important position. This form of underdeveloped density indicates that organisational and process analyses are at an immature stage. Here, we find themes called "women", "MGNREGS unemployment", and "rural employment", all marked with low centrality and density. The themes indicate the necessity of additional research on gender and employment, including program outcomes, which are relevant issues to be focused on in the future. The thematic map between 2006 and 2013 developed basic studies to include social and economic issues, which made it possible to define an interdisciplinary approach to implementation.

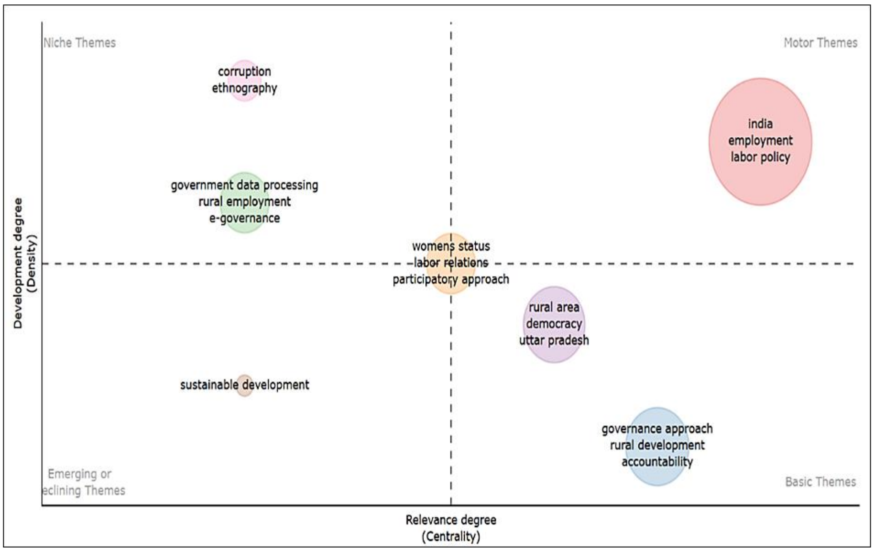

Figure 8: Thematic Evolution Time Slice (2016-2019)

The thematic map for 2016–2019 reflects a more structured intellectual framework for MGNREGS social accountability research, with emerging clusters pointing toward community empowerment and rural security (Figure 8). Based on co-word analysis, themes are classified along centrality (research relevance and interconnectedness) and density (internal development and maturity), resulting in four quadrants: Motor, Niche, Basic, and Emerging/Declining Themes. Interestingly, in this quadrant, "India" and "labour policy" are the strongest and best developed, indicating their influence on national social accountability and employment policy discussions on the MGNREGS. The Niche Themes quadrant contains "corruption", "ethnography", "government data processing", "rural employment", and "e-governance" as related and well-defined research areas. The papers deal with answers to problems and technologies with concentrated ideas that have not been incorporated into the general learning areas. Governance, accountability, rural areas, democracy, and Uttar Pradesh are the most significant themes with minimal interaction. This demonstrates not only the centrality of regions but also that development has occurred in an a la carte style. Part of the network does not have centrality and density for sustainable development, the status of women, and participatory approaches. This indicates a growing and passionate interest in these less well-studied but important subjects. The thematic area identifies the field where researchers can converge and conduct research on digital governance, sustainability, and gender. Social accountability research in the MGNREGS can accomplish more policy and development action in rural India by filling conceptual gaps in simple themes and encouraging studies of new topics.

Between 2020 and 2022, MGNREGS research increasingly consolidated around themes of employment and social protection, while also integrating discussions on technology in auditing and governance (Figure 9). Using co-word analysis and Scopus-level bibliometric standards, themes are mapped by centrality (network relevance) and density (thematic maturity), creating four quadrants: Motor, Niche, Basic, and Emerging or Declining Themes. According to the Motor Themes quadrant, the central and highly progressed terms are India, employment, and Andhra Pradesh which reveals that all these topics have national significance, the focus on job and security, and the role played by Andhra Pradesh to implement them. The Niche Themes quadrant includes "rural employment", "e-government", ICTs", denoting specialised and mature research areas. Although research on rural development, digital governance, and technology-based accountability is significant, it is not widely represented in the foreign literature. A major underlying concept in this area is poverty alleviation. The significance of this theme is not ignored; however, few new methods have been applied to investigate it. Emerging or Declining Themes such as "climate change", "social security", "agriculture", "rural areas", "sustainable development", and "ICTD" are found at the edges of the map. These areas are yet to be explored and are poised to receive future research attention as the environment and digital arisings are gaining prominence. Employment and regional studies are currently the subject of the maturing field of MGNREGS research, and the latter is influenced by modern technological advancements and environmental issues.

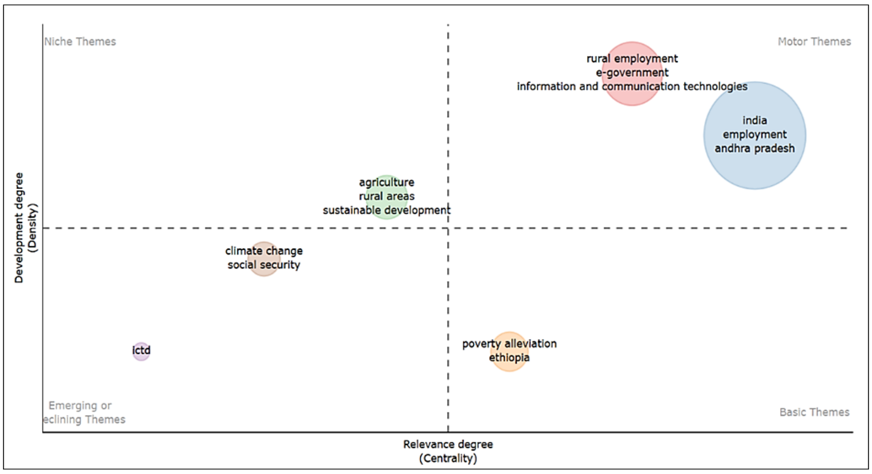

Figure 9: Thematic evolution Time Slice (2020-2022)

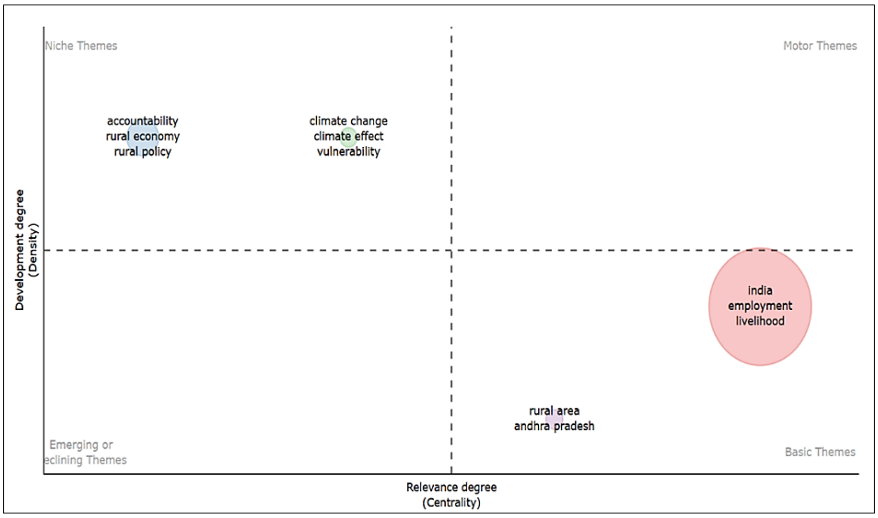

Figure 10: Thematic Evolution Time Slice (2023-2025)

In the 2023–2025 periods, thematic analysis shows a recalibration of MGNREGS research toward its foundational concerns of employment, policy, and governance, while maintaining links with broader socio-economic debates (Figure 10). The thematic map presents the interest in MGNREGS social accountability research in the next three years. Using co-word analysis aligned with Scopus bibliometric standards, themes were positioned by centrality (relevance and interconnectedness) and density (development and internal consistency) and classified into Motor, Niche, Basic, and Emerging or Declining Themes. The following themes are covered by many poems: India, labour, and occupations. "India" names the larger role of the program, "employment" focuses on farm wage growth and "livelihood" represents the extent of community and rural development influences. Among the Niche Themes, both "accountability" and "rural policy" have matured but do not have strong central locations. These concerns communicate various kinds of auditing social and sore management, as well as policies that guide the performance of the MGNREGS. Andhra Pradesh and rural area show being highly central yet very low density which indicates that they are not closely linked. The stand of the state is buttressed by innovative methods of technology and management in the MGNREGS. Emerging Themes were "climate change" and "climate effect vulnerability", characterised by low centrality and density. They established that people are more concerned about environmental issues in the MGNREGS. The focus in the 2023-2025 cycles is on employment in rural areas, environmental strength, and the continuation of governance subject matters, demonstrating that the MGNREGS is becoming a key element in the growth of rural areas.

Objective 4: To assess the thematic maturity of MGNREGS social audit research and highlight conceptual gaps and priority areas for future inquiry.

This study synthesises analyses of intellectual clustering, longitudinal thematic evolution, and quadrant-based strategic mapping. This approach enables the assessment of the intellectual maturity and thematic coherence of the MGNREGS social audit literature (11, 12). Examining themes in each strategic quadrant (motor, basic, niche, and emerging) shows which issue areas are well established and which are still poorly defined. The findings show that the field is anchored by mature themes such as rural employment, decentralised governance, and participatory accountability, which are situated in the motor quadrant with strong cohesion and relevance (2, 3). Several themes of high policy significance climate resilience, digital governance, and social security reside in the basic quadrant, indicating their strategic importance but conceptual immaturity (26, 31). The niche quadrant contains focused yet under-integrated subfields (e.g. demographic studies and regional legal frameworks), while the emerging quadrant points to evolving interests such as COVID-19 responses, ICTD, and gender-specific governance (7, 24).

They elucidated that there are gaps, which after further study, will complete the entire literature of MGNREGS. The absence of theoretical engagement with core constructs, such as poverty, job creation mechanisms, and institutional accountability frameworks, limits the field's ability to generate scalable insights (8, 20). The limited integration of interdisciplinary perspectives from development economics, environmental governance, digital public administration, and gender studies constrains the scope of the analysis (13, 14). This study identifies priority areas for future research, including the theorisation of digital social audits, design of climate-adaptive public employment frameworks, and development of community-driven monitoring systems (6, 16). The formulation of these subjects will further the value of research on MGNREGS and its utility.

Discussion

By analysing bibliometric data and themes, this study provides a clear picture of how research on social audits within the MGNREGS has changed and grown since 2005. Each research objective is addressed through data-driven insights and contextualised within broader scholarly trends (12, 13).

Objective 1: To identify and classify the motor, basic, niche, and emerging/declining themes that constitute the knowledge base of MGNREGS research.

Motor themes such as employment, rural development, and decentralised governance constitute the domain's intellectual core (3, 15). Basic themes, including poverty alleviation and rural policy, remain highly relevant but require deeper theoretical elaboration (8, 20). Niche themes such as ICT applications are well developed but less integrated into the mainstream discourse (31). Emerging or declining themes, such as climate vulnerability, digital inclusion, and pandemic responses, represent underexplored areas that warrant further investigation (24, 26).

Objective 2: To map the dominant intellectual themes and influential clusters within MGNREGS social audit scholarship during 2005–2025.

Governance, social accountability, and transparency have emerged as dominant intellectual clusters (2, 14). Co-word analysis highlights the centrality of keywords such as "India", "MGNREGA", and "rural development" (3). Additional clusters focusing on gender, legal frameworks, and digital audits underscore the diversity of scholarly attention in the field (7, 16).

Objective 3: To trace the evolution of conceptual structures and thematic orientations of the literature across distinct temporal phases.

The literature initially focused on the MGNREGS's legal foundations during 2005–2012 (1, 17). The subsequent period (2013–2019) emphasised gender inclusion and empowerment (9, 28), while the most recent phase (post-2020) has seen a growing interest in technological integration and region-specific case studies, particularly in states such as Andhra Pradesh and Kerala (6, 31).

Objective 4: To assess the thematic maturity of MGNREGS social audit research and highlight conceptual gaps and priority areas for future inquiry.

While the field exhibits intellectual maturity in themes such as employment and governance, gaps persist in integrating emerging domains such as environmental sustainability and digital governance (24). Conceptual voids related to interdisciplinary approaches and region-specific impact analyses limit the policy applicability of existing research (13, 14). Such gaps demand even stronger involvement in intersectoral theories and empirical approaches.

Table 1: Strategic Cluster Mapping in MGNREGS Social Audit Literature (2005–2025)

Clusters & Quadrants	Trends and Themes	Representative Articles	Future Research Prospects
Cluster 1 (Motor)	Participatory Governance and Rural Employment, Decentralization, transparency, accountability, wage employment	(2,3,6,14,16)	Comparative evaluation of decentralized audit systems; deeper theorization of transparency frameworks; benchmarking participatory mechanisms across states
Cluster 2 (Basic)	E-Governance and Digital Social Audits, ICT tools, biometric attendance, geo-tagging, audit portals	(26-28,31,33)	Investigate digital inclusion barriers; impact of audit tech on marginal groups; co-designing tools with rural communities
Cluster 3 (Niche)	Social Equity, Gender Participation, and Institutional Mechanisms, Women empowerment, caste dynamics, grievance redressal, bureaucratic efficiency	(7,9,24,29,30)	Gender audit frameworks; participation gaps among marginalized communities; localized grievance redress mechanisms
Cluster 4 (Emerging/Declining)	Climate Resilience and COVID-19 Response, Sustainable infrastructure, pandemic relief, adaptive governance	(8,23,24,26)	Climate-adaptive audit design; impact studies of MGNREGS in disaster-prone zones; longitudinal assessment of COVID-19 audits disruptions

Table 1 synthesizes the thematic clusters in MGNREGS-related social audit research by categorizing them into motor, basic, niche, and emerging/declining quadrants. It highlights key trends, representative works, and possible avenues for future inquiry within the evolving field. The findings underscore the imperative to strengthen social audit implementation at the grassroots level through institutionalisation, supported by comprehensive training and capacity building (34, 35). Tailoring audit designs to regional specificities and embedding culturally sensitive practices can substantially improve both coverage and effectiveness (24, 31). Furthermore, integrating digital innovations, such as geo-tagging and mobile dashboard technologies, can enhance audit efficiency and citizen engagement, provided that challenges related to digital literacy and accessibility are adequately addressed (4,23). Exemplars from high-performing states, notably Andhra Pradesh, offer valuable models for scaling up reforms nationwide (6, 18).

Practical Implications

The results of this study have several practical policy implications for policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). First, the proposed motor themes, including participatory governance, decentralised accountability, and rural employment, emphasise the necessity of institutionalising social audits as a core instrument for improving transparency and community ownership. These processes can be embedded in the governance structure to minimise leakage, enhance wage delivery, and enhance beneficiary trust. Second, the increased focus on digitalisation and e-governance signals the potential of technological advances, such as geo-tagging, biometric attendance, and mobile dashboards, to enhance the efficiency of audits. However, this also represents the need to have bespoke actions to respond to digital illiteracy among rural and marginalised groups so that the use of technology is not unwittingly used to enhance exclusion. Third, the findings indicate that social audits can be enhanced to better suit regions by adjusting the frameworks. States have their own models of innovation, which are replicable, since models like those used in Andhra Pradesh are sensitive to sociocultural conditions. Lastly, this study identifies MGNREGS as a platform to direct wider development goals or ambitions, such as gender empowerment, social equity, and climate resilience. Enhancing social audits in these areas could be used to spell out MGNREGS as a national priority for inclusive development and environmental setting. These lessons provide practical advice to policymakers, administrators, and civil society actors who aim to make the scheme more responsive and sustainably long-term.

Limitations

This study has some shortcomings regardless of its contributions. First, the analysis will only rely on the records found in the Scopus database, which, however extensive, could leave out the possible relevant research published in regional journals, governmental reports, or non-indexed papers. Such dependence may create bias in the database and restrict the range of perspectives considered. Second, the power of bibliometrics can never be as effective as the power of qualitative research in the maps of intellectual structures because, in the context of the observed phenomena, the information regarding the lived experience of stakeholders directly involved in MGNREGS cannot be complete. Therefore, the results can be seen as representative of macro-level research tendencies and not micro-level programmatic realities. Third, the time-segmentation of literature as particular time slices (2005-2025) can reduce the complexity and overlapping nature of theme development, especially when a literature is undergoing a major policy or socio-economic shift, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the research uses a secondary research methodology without the need to triangulate the bibliometric findings with wide-field validation. Although sensitivity and stability checks were carried out, mixed-method approaches that incorporate bibliometric evidence using empirical case studies, comparative analyses, and beneficiary perspectives may be used in future research.

Future Research Directions

Having noted the gaps, it is necessary for researchers to explore more important areas to develop thinking and make policies based on social accountability in the MGNREGS. Longitudinal investigations are necessary to elucidate the sustained impact of social audits on employment outcomes and governance accountability (10,22). In-depth case studies focusing on digital audit platforms within low-literacy and tribal communities can provide nuanced understandings of inclusion and transparency in technology-mediated audits (7, 24). Comparative analyses across Indian states could clarify how the political economy, administrative capacity, and sociocultural contexts influence audit effectiveness and citizen participation (22, 32). Employing mixed-methods approaches that foreground the lived experiences of beneficiaries particularly women and marginalised groups would shed light on participation barriers and equity considerations (9). Finally, the development of climate-adaptive social audit frameworks is crucial, given MGNREGS's expanding mandate on environmental restoration and water conservation, which aligns with India's broader climate resilience objectives (8, 26). With such priorities, the new objectives of research on MGNREGS will be enhanced in their idea as well as practical importance.

Conclusion

This study affirms the transformative role of social audits in enhancing transparency and fostering participatory governance within the MGNREGS framework (18, 16). The theoretical use of a bibliometric perspective in discussing these issues helped trace their development over the last 20 years. Despite notable advancements in digital governance tools and institutional frameworks, persistent challenges remain in sustaining institutional responsiveness and promoting active community participation (3, 6). The analysis reveals a strong intellectual foundation underpinning social audit research (11, 33), alongside significant conceptual gaps that warrant further scholarly attention.

Abbreviations

ICTD: Information and Communication Technologies and Development, MGNREGA: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, MGNREGS: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, NREGA: National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses,

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Author Contributions

Both the authors contributed equally.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

No AI-assisted technologies were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Ethics Approval

This study is based on secondary data and bibliometric analysis and does not involve human participants or animals; hence, formal ethics approval was not required.

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